DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 461 059 CG 027 401

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TITLE Traditional Wisdom and Male Adolescent Development on Marathon Bicycle Rides.
PUB DATE 1996-09-00
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Queensland Guidance and Counselling Association (9th, Brisbane, Queensland, Australia, September 1996).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adolescent Development; Adolescents; *Adventure Education; *Bicycling; Experiential Learning; Foreign Countries; Group Activities; Interpersonal Relationship; Males; *Outdoor Education; Participative Decision Making; Performance; Secondary Education; Secondary School Students; *Self Actualization; Social History; Youth Programs
IDENTIFIERS Australia (Queensland)

ABSTRACT

The challenge of the Australian lifestyle has historically led bushmen on journeys of arduous adventure which actively developed unfettered spirits and extraordinary endurance. These qualities have contributed to the development of the Australian psyche. As a way of passing on the qualities and values of Australian bushmen of years ago, an alternative education program began, in 1986, simulating these journeys by taking groups of youth on marathon bicycle rides across North Queensland, Australia. Since 1986, many rides have taken place, covering distances up to 1000 kilometers in periods ranging from 7 to 11 days. Participation in this ride, requiring teamwork, resourcefulness, and decision-making, is competitive. Boys that are chosen must complete a Keirsey Bates Temperament Profile; this becomes the personal management tool used to individualize nurturing and growth directions during the ride. Daily briefing and debriefing sessions are held, including discussions of mind-body management, cognitive conceptual frameworks, and wisdom understanding. At the end of the bike ride, each boy must write letters to every other boy in the group; each boy must also write a letter to himself reflecting on his own learning experiences and growth. Includes a schematic representation of adolescent-development marathon bike ride and adventure education. (Contains 47 References.) (LSR)

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# Traditional wisdom and male adolescent development on marathon bicycle rides

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## Traditional Wisdom & Marathon Biking in Early Adolescence

In 1986 I was the coordinator of the alternative education program at St Augustine"s College in Cairns. The program operated at year 11 and 12 level for those who did not want to follow academic course work or softer options.

The year was also the centenary year for the Gulf town of Croydon, where previously I had taken the boys to work on Mittagong Station and participate in the local rodeo.

During a discussion on Croydon I produced several photos of my grandfather's wagon being loaded with mining equipment in Ravenswood. This equipment was to be carted to Croydon, a distance of approximately 800 kilometres.

A discussion arose about the quality and values of Australian bushmen of a hundred years ago. Qualities that demanded that up to twenty four horses be caught and harnessed before the days walk of perhaps 50 kilometres began. This was in an environment where there were no roads or bridges. Each creek bed and range had to be encountered as an individual challenge to be overcome with no outside help. Broken axles and broken harnesses had to be fixed as they went. Then at the end of the day there was the unharnessing, feeding and hobbling of the horses before the needs of the wagoner were met.

The challenge of this life style led men on journeys of actively developing unfettered spirits, of adventure, and extraordinary endurance. All of these qualities have contributed to the development of the Australian psyche. These qualities are worth passing on to our young.

The boys' response to this situation was that they could be as resilient in these matters as the men of those days in that situation which was presented to them. They decided they could walk and ride horses to Croydon just as readily. The challenge had been issued. The logistics of taking 30 boys on horse back to Croydon in June was beyond our means. The most practical alternative was a bike ride.

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In June 1986 twenty five boys and myself rode the 530 kilometres to Croydon in six days and worked on Tabletop Station for the following three weeks.

Since then, 32 rides have taken place, covering most of North Queensland in all directions from Cairns. The rides have covered distances of up to 1000 kilometres in periods ranging from seven to eleven days. The rides have had a profound effect on the lives of many of the young men who have participated in them. The rides continue today and operate out of Abergowrie College, a boarding college set 40 kilometres from Ingham in the Herbert Valley.

Initially the rides targeted boys in the top end of the senior school. When the rides became more widely publicised and were advertised as a voluntary event within the school, popularity was most strongly felt in the lower end of the school in the period of early adolescence. These rides have now become the ambition and goal of boys in early secondary schooling. The event has operated out of three schools (with participation by other students) over the 11 year period. They have been St. Augustine's College, Cairns (Pastoral Care Coordinator, and Alternative Education Coordinator), Cooktown State High (Acting G.O.) and Abergowrie College where I am currently in a Guidance and Counselling position.

**Preparation and Planning**

The event is a ride and not a race. Riders stop and regroup every 1- kilometres, no one is left behind. Participation in the event, however, is competitive. Notification of the event is restricted to an eight hour period. I announce the event at a full school assembly, boys must collect a coloured piece of paper from me and put their name, and three reasons why they want to participate then return the paper to me by four o'clock in the afternoon. The most recent ride produced forty three names. This must be cut back to 20 to 25 names. Rides that involve bigger numbers lose their character.

There has been specialised rides in the bigger school environments. Boys who are unassertive, smokers, boys from single mum families, and boys who want the extra challenge to know they are alive. I also encourage verbally aggressive boys to turn this into personal assertive action by taking part in a ride.

Once the boys haven been chosen and parental permission given, the participants do a Kersey Bates temperament profile. This then becomes the personal management tool which I use to individualise nurturing and growth directions during the ride. This

very often gives the boys an understanding of their unique strengths and weaknesses, their skills and how they might handle stress on the ride in different ways. It also gives them a sense of their own integrity.

They must then begin the process of personal preparation. The first step involves choosing a route from three or four proposed.

Each student must prepare their own menu for the length of the event. The menu will include breakfast, midday meal, and snack food. This food is then organised and packed in a strong box. A community meal out of subscribed funds is prepared and eaten in the evening. Large quantities of very appetising food are prepared for this meal, this is done as a form of celebration.

An important part of preparation also involves a sound mechanical knowledge of the bike the boy will be riding. Mechanical soundness, a basic understanding of attitudes of responsibility, and an acknowledgment that the rider's attitude to his machine is what will make the ride successful for him. Boys are encouraged to team up (3 or 4) and carry tools, tubes and spares which will cover all eventualities.

Sleeping gear and clothing must also be managed by each individual. Western nights are often cold and this must be considered. Boys sleep under the stars and not in tents. Rides are scheduled for full moon periods.

Because the event is a ride and not a race, each person will come to realise his own natural riding rhythm, and relationships to others on the ride. The basic rhythm of the group is the 10 kilometre stop and regrouping. Some boys may ride that distance in 15 to 20 minutes, others may take 35 minutes. As the event moves on during the day individual riders will vary their placings and patterns. Some better riders will drop back and support weaker ones, or someone who is fast in one section may take a more leisurely place in another section.

**Briefing & Debriefing**

Daily briefing and debriefing sessions are held. The morning sessions taking about an hour, the evening sessions vary in length depending on what has been observed during the day and the spirit of the group. The content of these sessions will range over the four quadrants of personal adolescent development given in the schema. All discussions are held sitting on the ground in a circle.

Mind - Body management involves reflection, reading, discussion on energy management, body reactions and general observation of how people in the group are handling or sharing the difficulty of the event. Each person is challenged to make a contribution. The content of these discussions is very often highly emotional, no right of reply is allowed until it is your turn to speak. A frank discussion of issues will often involve behaviours which people find difficulty coping with. Personality games are also played. A set of 150 card with positive human characteristics and attitudes is distributed within small groups so that people understand how others in the group see their positive qualities. The effect of this hard physical work on their bodies is also shared.

Cognitive conceptual frameworks are discussed in terms of safety issues, responsibility for equipment, and the balance between egocentric behaviours and group organisational behaviour. All discussion in this area relate to what am I contributing to the group and the bike ride concept or what am I taking away from the group by thoughtless inconsiderate behaviours. This is then set in the context of early settlers' history and humanity. Poetry and stories from Patterson and Lawson are shared. Journal entries are also made at this stage.

Wisdom understanding is gained by sharing the great minds of humanity. These sessions are the draw card and motivational sessions which point away from the mundane towards something greater than the limitations of our own life experiences. Authors used in these sessions are Jesus Christ, Deepak Chopra, Matthew Fox, Stewart Wilde, Albert Einstein, and David Suzuki. Students are also introduced to paradoxical logic through small Zen reflections on the nature of the universe. All of these authors contribute significantly to the development of human potential and when interpreted will have a significant message of hope and enthusiasm for young people. Often the wisdom of the morning sessions are reflected in a light hearted way during the events of the day.

The understanding of wisdom comes to the young through being connected to everything else in creation. When a peer experiences this connection we describe it in three ways, transpersonal, ecstatic, or mystical. All three give the experience of standing outside one's centre in a moment of super conscious joy. That the boys experience this is beyond doubt. Entries in their letters and journals attest to this fact.

One of the principle ways in which this experience is nurtured is through meditation sessions, both discursive and transcendental on at least two or three mornings of the ride.

Bringing all of these influences together signifies and strengthens the inner journey and compliments the outer physical journey with it's wave motion of unfamiliar challenge and growth. In order to draw your attention to the wider philosophy involved in the bike ride concept I would now like to turn to an explanation of the schema provided.

This diagram represents the interconnectedness of the core of the person, the process of adolescent development, the actuality of the ride and the theory of adventure education. This has been the culmination of the 11 years history and readings of and in the event. If all goes well on a ride, we as a group are able to deal with many of the issues which appear on the schema. The participants literally fly as the positive energy of fulfilment and achievement takes hold of the group. There have been times however when we have not got much past survival mode. The destructive energy of unfulfilled lives spills out and threatens the survival of the ride. When this happens all energy is diverted towards keeping the group functioning and completing the physical task of the ride.

**Shared Learning**

I would like to devote the final sections of this paper to student responses. The final act of the bike ride is the letter writing session. Each boy must write a letter to each other boy in the group. Each boy must also write a letter to himself reflecting on his own learning experiences and growth. The collective letter is then put in an envelope along with his own reflections. He has the choice of either sealing the letter or leaving it open. If he leaves it open it is a sign that the leader may read the contents. If he seals it, it is for him only. The letters are then collected and given to the boys a week later, when the euphoria of the event has worn off. The letters become vital forms of affirmation for later times of distress. As a leader I have been privileged to read the majority of these responses over the history of the ride. They have provided me with an insight in the heart of adolescence and the strength and beauty of what I see has contributed immensely to my own growth as a person. As a leader I have also been part of the process and have received and given these letters.

The sections I share should give an insight into some of the issues raised on the schema.

"I have learnt a lot from you, and I have changed a bit."

" Words of wisdom, I know my quest in life."

"I never thought of you as a teacher, or a person, just something that drives us on and fills us with life and joy."

"Gary, I think we have rebuilt our friendship, I think anyway. Gary you had a big influence on me, which made me learn a lot for the future."

"You taught us all to look on the positive things within yourself."

"I can't explain what I think of you in words."

The bike ride changed my perspective on life, emotionally, and physically."

"Thanks Gary for everything from the guy who broke every bike."

"You have to be one of those people who do extraordinary things because you brought us all together and in a week brought us all to be friends. I will never forget what you have taught us."

"I think the bike ride was an excellent experience...I also learnt that you have to be mentally and spiritually strong....I read a bit about the universal law and thought that was good."

"The bike ride was weird and hard but I enjoyed it....The first day was pure pain, it was hard full on hard...there were some disrespectful little punks...but all up I got a lot out of the bike ride."

"I did not think I would finish it, but as the week progressed, I started to get determined to finish the 500 kilometres, then most of us rode the extra 20 kilometres for the people who are less fortunate than us."

"I thought I was going to die, and I nearly gave up, but I didn't."

"You are given a taste of the real outback, you tend to think about what you really want in life, and as you ride you let your frustrations go."

"On the bike ride I find myself and who I really am."

"On the way back to the college we all had time to reflect and sleep. All in all I found the bike ride character building, muscle building and definitely a confidence boost.

"I look forward to the meditation in the morning, on the next bike ride."

"Well Gary, here I am in Sweden, and I saw the Borealis in the sky, it took me back to the night near Richmond when we camped on the treeless plains. The sun was a ball on one horizon and the full moon was coming up on the other one, we were standing in the middle of it. It felt like I was standing in the middle of the universe. I will never forget it till the day I die."

These are some of the comments that are representative of the hundreds that have been written over the years. They all attest to the effectiveness of the fully integrated program.

Parents' comments have been largely verbal but some of the ones I have in writing are worth sharing. This letter from a parent of an adolescent who had attempted to take his own life.

"I believe the Cooktown ride last year was instrumental in turning things around for James, and I am sure that they have many other young men over the years. He is a much happier child and his self esteem has grown enormously with the success he has experienced."

From another,

"No amount of talking or thinking about a situation changes it. It takes action and involvement of the adolescent. Bike rides facilitate this. They enable the individual to become involved."

Finally from the adults involved in the case of a bike rider who took his own life after years of struggle.

"He said the only time he touched something that was real was on the bike ride to Laura."

It is to the Michael's of Australian society that I dedicate this work.

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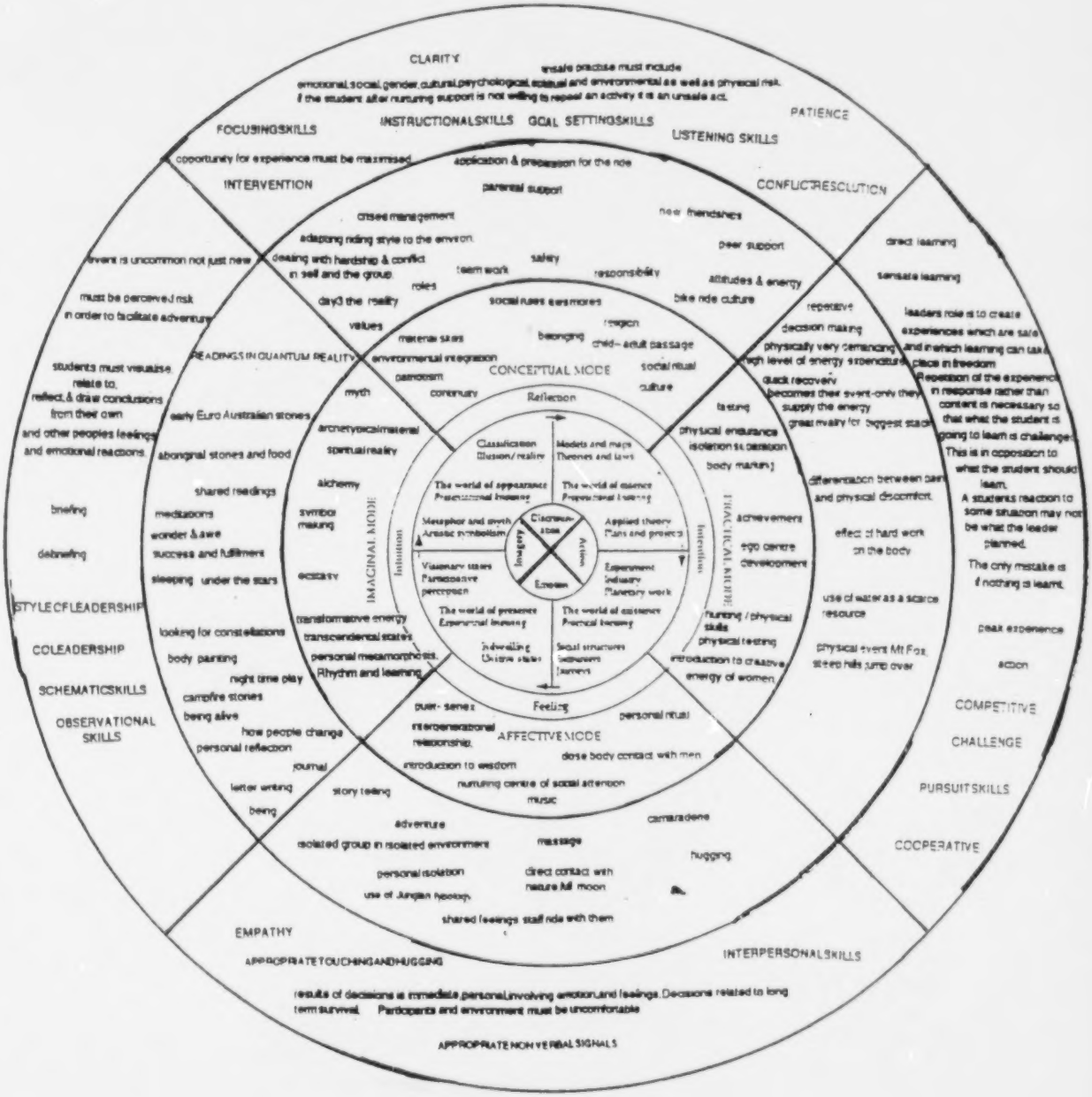
## Schematic representation of adolescent development marathon bike ride and adventure education

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